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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KATHMANDU 001077

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREF](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [NP](#) [BU](#)

SUBJECT: NEPAL: PRM PDAS PRESSES GON ON REFUGEE PROTECTION

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i., Randy W. Berry. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) Summary: During a November 11-12 visit to Kathmandu, PRM Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary (PDAS) Samuel Witten met with Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sujata Koirala and Home Minister Bhim Rawal to discuss the situations of Tibetans and Bhutanese refugees in Nepal. The Government of Nepal (GON) was appreciative of USG efforts on Bhutanese resettlement but conceded that its desire to resolve the refugee situation via engagement with the Government of Bhutan (GOB) was tempered by more pressing internal issues. In response to Witten's request that the GON continue to enhance its protection of long-staying Tibetans in Nepal, the GON made clear that continuing pressure from the Chinese made this issue a very sensitive one for the government, but also acknowledged the U.S. message and clearly understood that this was an important humanitarian issue from the U.S. perspective. Witten also visited the UNHCR Tibetan Reception Center and met with UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the Kathmandu-based representatives of the Bhutanese Core Group and Tibet Contact Group (septel).

Koirala Promises to Engage Bhutan

¶2. (C) In his November 12 meeting with Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Koirala, Witten updated ForMin Koirala on the progress of the USG's resettlement of Bhutanese refugees to the United States and expressed his appreciation for the GON's cooperation in these efforts. Witten noted that his discussions with the GOB on the return of some Bhutanese refugees to Bhutan have not been satisfactory, and that the GOB blamed poor relations with Nepal for the lack of progress on returns.

¶3. (C) Koirala thanked Witten for the U.S. support with the "difficult problem" of the Bhutanese refugees. She promised to engage the GOB and to "try her best" to resolve the refugee issue. According to Koirala, she was scheduled to meet the Bhutanese ForMin in October in New York on the sidelines of UNGA (at the request of the Bhutanese), but that the GOB ForMin cancelled the meeting because of illness. (Note: It has been over two years since the GON and GOB have held official talks. The Bhutanese Chargé in New Delhi (reftel) told us that it was the GON who stood them up at a proposed meeting on the margins of the NAM summit in Egypt.

End Note.) She noted that the previous Nepali Congress-led governments had been "very active" on the Bhutanese refugee issue, but that the current government was consumed by internal challenges. However, Koirala said that the current PM of Nepal was concerned about this issue and keen to make progress.

¶4. (C) Witten reminded the ForMin that a certain number of Bhutanese refugees would choose neither resettlement nor return and would likely prefer to remain in Nepal. For these refugees, Witten suggested that the GON would need to consider some type of local integration program. Koirala did not respond to the Witten,s comment directly, but instead referenced ongoing struggles within Nepal and stressed that the refugees should have a right to return to their own country. (Home Minister Rawal had a more helpful and forthcoming response to this question see below.)

Koirala Open but Vague on Tibetan Registration

¶5. (C) Witten also thanked the GON for its support for the transit of Tibetan refugees from China to India. The ForMin said that the GON tries to assist the refugees, but noted that this is a "very sensitive" issue for Nepal's "northern neighbor" (China). Witten acknowledged the pressure placed on the GON by China but noted that the U.S., and other countries, hoped that Nepal would continue to be a good host for refugees. Because many Tibetan refugees living in Nepal do not have any legal documentation, Witten

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strongly suggested that the GON consider a program to register the refugees. He noted that such an initiative would be welcomed by the United States and other countries and would earn the praise of many in the U.S. Government, including members of Congress following the Tibetan issue. Charg added that clarifying the legal status of the refugees would enhance the GON's efforts to establish law and order. The ForMin suggested that she would "do her best" on registration, but did not appear to appreciate fully the issue. Her aide, Under Secretary Rudra Nepal, reiterated that the Tibetan refugee issue was "very sensitive."

Home Minister Rawal Appreciates Cooperation

¶6. (C) On a day of large scale Maoist demonstrations at the GON's main offices (Singha Durbar), Home Minister Rawal began his November 12 meeting with Witten by explaining the GON's view of the political situation and expressing his growing frustration with the Maoists (septel). Turning to the refugee situation, Rawal thanked the United States for resettling Bhutanese refugees. Witten underscored that U.S. support for the Bhutanese resettlement program remained strong and that the United States looked forward to working closely with the GON to continue to resettle large numbers of Bhutanese refugees. Rawal was skeptical of Bhutan's willingness to accept return of even a few refugees, noting that Nepal had tried to convince Bhutanese officials in the past on this issue. Rawal indicated that further bilateral discussions between Bhutan and Nepal would be required to move return discussions forward; however, he noted that domestic turmoil prevented the GON from paying full attention to the issue. Rawal also stressed that India has a role to play in resolution of the Bhutanese issue since the refugees crossed Indian territory during their initial flight from Bhutan to Nepal. On the prospect of a residual Bhutanese population remaining in Nepal after the resettlement program ends, Rawal said it should not be difficult for the GON to manage a small "settlement program." Witten noted that Rawal,s attitude on possible resettlement of the residual population was a very positive development. (Comment: Given prior GON sensitivity on the issue of local integration of a residual population, Rawal,s upbeat observation was particularly encouraging. END COMMENT)

Understands Advantages of Registration, But...

17. (C) Witten expressed U.S. appreciation for Nepal's cooperation on the transit of Tibetans through Nepal to India. Witten also suggested that registering Tibetan refugees living "permanently" in Nepal would be advantageous both for the Tibetans and the Nepali government. Rawal agreed that registration would be "useful," noting that illegal migration created law and order programs for the government. However, Rawal also expressed the view that for refugees merely transiting Nepal to India, registration was not as important. When Witten clarified that registration is important for long-staying Tibetan refugees, not those merely transiting Nepal, Rawal did not reply directly but only said generally that Nepal "tries its best" to protect the Tibetan population and respect their rights.

Tibet Demonstrations Create Problems

18. (C) Rawal added an observation that groups within the refugee communities are sometimes violent, which creates problems for Nepal given its "geopolitical situation" (read: China) and own political instability. Rawal has asked the Tibetan leaders to remain peaceful and not initiate "political movements" from Nepali territory. Witten noted that the Tibetan elders living in Nepal agreed that violent demonstrations are unhelpful. He urged the GON to express "appropriate restraint" when dealing with demonstrators, and requested that the GON continue and enhance its protection of the larger Tibetan community. Charg added that U.S. interest in the plight of the Tibetan refugees is not

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political, but is purely humanitarian; like Nepal, we respect China's territorial integrity and believe Tibet is part of China.

19. (U) PDAS Witten has cleared this message.
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